

The Anthropology of the Little Mermaid

by Chantel L. Tattoli

Among the expertly *-ologies*, there can be no more exhaustive of a field than anthropology. It's hard-pressing to disqualify much, if anything, from the study of humankind. Extinct and extant humanity is a lot of ground covered, after all. What's out-of-bounds given that jurisdiction? The field of anthropology goes on and on, without seeable fences, and even when the discussion is limited to one sub-field, cultural anthropology, it doesn't winnow out all that much. Cultural anthropology is omnipresent too. It's domestic, right under our noses and in our own backyards, *and* it's "exotically" abroad. The walls demarcating *here* from *there* aren't very concrete anymore, anyway. As globalization renders the world evermore permeable, it's never been easier for people and our sociocultural productions to traverse from *x* to *y* as swiftly like the parcels of a courier service overnight. Like it or not, we're involved. (We may glean that from the financial crisis, at the minimum.)

It's strange times, indeed. Berbers have iPods, even remotely couched in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco. I've seen a boy turn up the volume while his mother kohls the eyes of his crying newborn sister. Garbologists riffle through our landfills, analyzing our consumption patterns, telling us unrealized things about ourselves. Somewhere, one group persecutes another, who retaliates in turn, and the infamous chicken-or-egg question is shouting from the peanut gallery, and you might be able to see both sides. You find yourself seated across from a Dane eating lasagna with chopsticks, and a smile cracks in your face, because *la condition humaine* is unprecedentedly variegated. Sometimes it breaks your heart. Oftener, it's just weird—the type of weird which calls forth magnifying glasses from pockets. And looking around, you may hear an earnest, repressed nerd in you exclaim, "Fascinating!" At least, cause you to scratch your head and grunt, "Huh." Seems that by way of living in the 21st century, all of us are amateur cultural anthropologists of sorts.

The point of cultural anthropology is supposed to be to help people understand other people, to "get" the cryptic Other, even when they are not so faraway or foreign—because the Other may reside

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in just the next zip code over. While focusing on cultural anthropology as an undergraduate, I became sensitized to the need to recover anthropology from the ivory tower, and put it readably in everyone's lap. The research, valuable though, is often so pedantic as to never trickle down and circulate outside of academia, and it's a crying shame. Today, it's apparent that a willingness to try and understand the other side is the prerequisite step to solving issues worldwide. In other words, let us be anthropological. And the thing about anthropology is, there's always something to feast on; no matter where we are, case studies are replete if only we turn our eyes more critically to the world around us.

I went to see her. O dainty, patinated, finned-one. The Little Mermaid (*Den lille havfrue*) statue in Copenhagen harbor at Langelinie Pier is a veritable mecca for tourists in Denmark. In a country of not even 6 million, some 1 million come annually to admire *Den lille havfrue*, the brainchild of beloved story writer and Danish son Hans Christian Andersen. And I quote the 1837 text, "Do you not love me the best of them all?" the eyes of the little mermaid seemed to say." Danish brewer Carl Jacobsen commissioned countryman Edvard Eriksen to create the bronze statue, which was realized in 1913 and at 4 ft., appropriately little. While the original is possessed by Eriksen's heirs,¹ a copy of the sea maiden has since poised wistfully on the apex of boulders, but, and herein the kicker, not without routine interruption.

Den lille havfrue has been vandalized time and again beginning with an incident in 1961, when panties and a brassiere were painted on her, and her hair was dyed bright red. She was proverbially red-painted in 1963. The next year, 1964, she was beheaded (supposedly) by Situationist artists and, in fact, the original head was not recovered and had to be subsequently reproduced. Come 1976, she was painted yet again. In 1984, her right arm was sawn off but returned. A second, bungled try to behead the statue in 1990 rendered an 18 cm gash in her slender neck. She lost her head again in 1998, but thankfully it turned up anonymously, and she was restored once more. On the eleventh of September of 2003 she was blasted off of her rocky roost entirely. In 2004, when Turkey's entry into the European Union was under consideration, the sea maiden was found appareled in burka, and sporting a sash reading, "TYRKIET I EU?" On March 8, 2006, International Women's Day, she was splashed with green paint, "8 Marts" was scrawled on her rocky dais, and a dildo was affixed to her hand. She was doused with pink paint in March 2007, and sloshed again just two months later; the word "AV" ("ouch") was left framed beside the statue. In May of 2007, The Little Mermaid was

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discovered robed in Muslim dress and hijab. Most recently, she was bombed with white paint in June of 2008.

One may think, that nice statue, *why would someone want to damage it?* Those no good hoodlums. There is a real tendency to dismiss vandalism as *merely vandalism*, the past-time of punks. But that explanation is facile, pretty inaccurate because it ignores complexities. True, maybe vandalism is disrespectful, but that usually is the point. “Vandalism” is one of those blanket terms which glosses over the question, “Why?” Why would someone do that? “*Why*” is the slippery question cultural anthropologists are always trying to get at. As a rule of thumb, if we do not get “*why*,” we probably don’t understand the perspective. The thing to do is try to see yourself in the other peoples’ shoes, because from the perspective of the Other’s shoes, their behavior should make more sense. This is the golden rule. Even when it’s hard. I paraphrase the late anthropologist Clifford Geertz “To understand, isn’t to forgive.”²

Some graffiti, for example, is now distinguished popularly as “discourse,” i.e., serious stuff. Marginalized or disenfranchised groups, by definition powerless to extents, are compelled to find outlets, and sometimes creative ways like graffiti to talk about their predicaments. In this way, graffitiing is not just marking on private and public space but a resource for resourceless people. As a fugitive act of insubordination, it can be a way to talk-back to the system, to The Man, to the social facts and forces that affect them personally.³ (And there are reasons graffiti and ghettos go hand-in-hand, but the reasons are not the usual suspects.)

Den lille havfrue is targeted so frequently for attack as a national icon that the Danish Ministry of Tourism to refers to her fondly as “a tough old lady.”□ And we are left to wonder “*How come? Why?*”. It’s not to say that each and every incident is a profound sociological tactic, doubtlessly some of the attacks were drunken dares. But generally speaking, it seems like one of those cases where there’s more than meets the eye. Figuring out “*why?*” comes down to the messy business of interpretation—soliciting the opinions of natives, comparing what they say against what you see from the outside looking in, articulating conclusions, and, importantly, reporting back to natives to check if you “got it,” or not.

Answering to what is particular about the statue is a good place to start, and *Den lille havfrue* seems

to be a sitting duck on a couple of notes. Firstly, note well the statue's symbolic nature; that right there is an unsafe seat. On the one hand, symbols are extremely potent, but on the other hand, because they stand adamantly for *something*, they are liable to be renegotiated or hijacked and put to new ends. Like the United States' Statue of Liberty, *Den lille havfrue* similarly stands for its country. □ Danes are all too proud to claim Andersen as one of their own; plus, he's a salient go-to reference in a pinch. I'm told, when Danes are abroad, what of their homeland do they cite, HCA and his—their—LM, of course. In fact, they think her such a landmark that they are shipping the statue off to Shanghai to represent them in the 2010 World Expo.⁶ *Den lille havfrue* is sacred, ergo, prone to attack. Mistreatment of the statue is a tabooed line that shouldn't be crossed, but is crossed, and ironically for that selfsame reason. And it helps, probably, that it is a *she*. What with a feminine human form, it's easily personified, and its treatment becomes all the more significant.

Secondly, hurting her is an effective way to soapbox, because, when you have something to say aloud or to vent anonymously, you want to do something that will attract attention and publicity, you want to do a shocking thing to voice yourself. Indeed, when I've asked Danes why they think the statue is vandalized so much, their explanations are all variations of “for attention.” Taken together, *Den lille havfrue* is an easy target.

What is striking about the vandalization of The Little Mermaid is that it happens consistently, and at the hands of perpetrators whose reasons evidently run the gamut. Some of the cases of vandalism are fairly clear-cut: “TYRKIET I EU?” is tell-tale—we know what this was about. While other instances leave us guessing, it's safe to say that the vandalism is reflective of going's on in Denmark at large—be it debate on gender roles or diasporas or something else. And like Pygmalion's Galatea, it is as if *Den lille havfrue* has come into a self, no longer the lovesick thing Andersen created, her mien is wise with years. She can say a lot, about Denmark, about how wide but readable the world is, about how we can gain insight from the most low-profile things, even the anthropology of a little mermaid.

¹ Danish Ministry of Tourism. Creation of the Little Mermaid. http://www.visitcopenhagen.com/content/tourist/what_to_see_and_do/sights_and_attractions/the_little_mermaid/creation_of_the_little_mermaid, accessed October 1, 2009.

² Geertz, C. 1989. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford University Press.

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³ Goldstein, Donna M. 2003. *Laughter Out of Place: Race, Class, Violence, and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown*. University of California Press.

⁴ Danish Ministry of Tourism. *Life of the Little Mermaid*.

<http://www.visitcopenhagen.com/composite-1348>, accessed October 1, 2009.

⁵ Mortensen, Finn Hauberg. 2008. The Little Mermaid: Icon and Disneyfication. *Scandinavian Studies* 80(4):437.

⁶ Danish Ministry of Tourism. *The Little Mermaid to China*.

http://www.visitcopenhagen.com/content/tourist/what_to_see_and_do/sights_and_attractions/the_little_mermaid/the_little_mermaid_to_china, accessed October 1, 2009.

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Published in 1837, *The Little Mermaid* is a classic Fairy Tale written by Hans Christian Andersen, about a mermaid who seeks to become human. Merfolk live for centuries, but have no afterlife. The daughters of the royal family are allowed to go up to the surface once they turn 15, and for several years in a row, the youngest one longingly drinks in the tales her older sisters tell of what it is like up there. The prince she loves finds her and, charmed by her grace, takes her in and makes her a sort of pet. Then he is betrothed, and his intended bride turns out to be the temple maiden who first found him on the shore after the little mermaid rescued him from drowning. He is delighted to marry the woman he thinks is his rescuer, but the mermaid silently mourns. The Little Mermaid has not been part of this debate but last year a Disney live action remake of the 1989 animated film of the same name was the subject of a controversy after African American actress Halle Bailey was cast in the central role. "I am having a hard time seeing what is particularly racist in the fairy tale *"The Little Mermaid,"* Ane Grum-Schwensen, researcher at the H.C. Andersen Center at University of Southern Denmark, told local news wire Ritzau. Copenhagen's Little Mermaid labelled "racist fish". Add a Comment. Related Articles. A mermaid (from the Middle English mere meaning "sea" and maid, meaning "girl") is a legendary aquatic creature with the head and torso of a human female and a fish-like tail. The male version of a mermaid is known as a merman, and the gender-neutral plural is merfolk or merpeople. Merfolk appear in a plethora of cultures worldwide—legends often tell of mermaids singing to sailors, enchanting them, and luring them to their death. The origin of the mermaid legend is often traced to the manatee or... The little mermaid swam away behind some tall rocks that stuck out of the water. She covered her hair and her shoulders with foam so that no one could see her tiny face, and then she watched to see who would find the poor Prince. In a little while one of the young girls came upon him. She seemed frightened, but only for a minute; then she called more people. The mermaid watched the Prince regain consciousness, and smile at everyone around him. But he did not smile at her, for he did not even know that she had saved him. She felt very unhappy, and when they led him away to the big building she dived sadly down into the water and returned to her father's palace.